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Abstract

This paper explores the nature of websites that glorify eating disorders, or EDs. These websites are often referred to as “pro-ED” (pro-eating disorder), “pro-ana” (pro-anorexia), or “pro-mia” (pro-bulimia). For the purpose of this paper, only pro-ED, pro-ana, and pro-recovery website research were the focus. Scholarly articles found in California State University San Bernardino’s database were used to distinguish the different ways that these websites help and cause harm to individuals. Articles about pro-ED and pro-ana websites helped prove harmful to individuals, claiming the disorder as a “lifestyle”. It also showed the support these communities feel when interacting through blogs, comments, and chat rooms. Articles on pro-recovery websites showed small similarities with pro-ana and pro-ED websites, however proved to be more beneficial to individuals viewing this material. E-health communities such as “Proud2BMe” have also shown to improve empowerment in learning about their disorder and a more positive outlook on their future.

Keywords

eating disorder (ED), pro-ana, pro-eating disorder (pro-ED), lifestyle, community, pro-recovery

Author Statement

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Pro-Anorexia Website Harm

Traditionally, the media such as television, advertisements, magazines and the like, have promoted a thin ideal version of the human body. For some, achieving these standards of beauty ideals can become an addiction and often lead to eating disorders. Eating disorders are mental illnesses that people may suffer from by not eating, classified as anorexia, or binge eating and vomiting, classified as bulimia. When the internet was created, websites and underground online communities began forming in favor of eating disorders. These websites create a safe space for those who suffer from eating disorders and provide tips on how to continue these behaviors, calling it a “lifestyle”. In more recent years, social media apps, like Instagram became more accessible and made it easier to promote these behaviors. With the constant growth of these websites and communities in social media, it becomes more accessible. While clinicians are divided whether these websites provide a safe shelter for sufferers, or harm, it becomes clear that there are more negative effects on people who view these websites and participate in them. Fortunately, websites providing help and recovery have emerged, helping these individuals feel empowered.

Eating Disorders as a Lifestyle

People either have a hate or love relationship with food - some more than others. It is true that many people experience a desire to lose weight and do so healthily. However, due to the influences of media and perhaps of peers, there are those who try to lose weight or maintain a certain weight, in an unhealthy way. According to Hoffman (2018) an addiction does not necessarily mean abusing a substance, it can also be behavioral, such as gambling, or shopping. In this case, patterns of disordered eating can also become addictions. Eating Disorders (ED) have always been viewed as mental disorders,

however, with the rise of Pro-anorexia, or pro-ana, websites and communities, viewers are now seen as conscious in choosing this “lifestyle” (Hoffman, 2018, p. 107)

The first wave of pro-ana websites began around 2001, where it provided a safe space for people with eating disorders to contact each other, share their journey together and to get advice on weight loss and on hiding their behaviors from family and friends. Organizations against eating disorders eventually shut down these websites but unfortunately caused greater publicity and more websites promoting Anorexia as a lifestyle appeared. This movement was mostly led by, “wannarexic” young women, or young women who wanted to have anorexia and lose weight fast. The movement gained a lot of fame with the slogan, “Anorexia is not a disease, but a way of life” (Hoffman, 2018, p. 107). Despite efforts to stop these websites from reaching people at risk or who are easily influenced, new websites continue to appear. This movement also encouraged starvation and neglected the negative consequences of it, masking it as if it were a normal lifestyle, like being a vegetarian or pescatarian.

Pro-ana websites introduced viewers to a disease, which, “...is mistakenly perceived as a ‘cool’ way to lose weight, a lifestyle” (Hoffman, 2018, p. 109). This lifestyle, promotes the glorifying of anorexia, and provides a strong motivation for extreme weight loss. Tips on what to eat, links to caloric value of food, photos of emaciated bodies, and methods on restricting appetite were all present in these websites. Consequently, they failed to provide information about negative consequences which can lead to serious health consequences, including death. Those who chose anorexia as a “lifestyle” claimed so without realizing the full impact it could have on their both their physical and mental health.

Cause of Viewing Pro-ana Websites

Pro-ana websites provided many methods on how to restrict food and maintain a certain weight and were usually created by young women. The viewers of these websites were between the ages of thirteen and twenty-five (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007). These methods can be harmful to viewers who may be easily influenced by the promise of the “ideal” body type. Bardone and Cass (2007) conducted a study that resulted in evidence that viewing pro-ana websites could cause negative consequences.

The study consisted of twenty-four female undergraduates randomly assigned to view one of three websites. These included: a pro-ana website, female images with average sized women, and one on home décor. It was found that participants who viewed the pro-ana websites had negative effects in low self-esteem, low appearance, and self-efficacy. They also saw themselves as weighing more than initially, although there were no differences in BMI (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007).

Viewing images of emaciated women with protruding bones and thigh gaps were found to be experienced negatively by the participants exposed to pro-ana websites. Messages such as the, “Thin Commandments”, ten rules to follow in order to achieve the anorexic lifestyle, present itself as a way of living and not a disorder. Evidently, the women who viewed these messages about the importance of being thin experienced, “cognitive consequences”, such as self-comparison with female images, and further reported, “likelihood of engaging in various behaviors and cognitions related to food, exercise, and weight” (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007). This study claims that negative consequences can occur when exposed to pro-ana websites.

Social Media Aesthetic

As pro-eating disorder online communities became more scrutinized and monitored, they began to turn towards more accessible

platforms, such as Instagram. This was because Instagram is “... more visual, less hierarchical, more open due to the high number of public accounts and more difficult to moderate due to large volumes of cross-tagged images” (Ging & Garvey, 2018, p. 1182). Due to the nature of Instagram and its heavily image-based operation, pro-ana supporters are more likely to be less moderated and reach a wider audience. They can do this by using hashtags such as “ana” and “fasting”, which could potentially reach users who are suffering or are at risk from eating disorders.

According to Ging & Garvey (2018) the nine categories identified in their research were: 1) Thinspiration 2) Interactive 3) Text-based quotes 4) Pro-ana linked with depression 5) Self-harm and suicide 6) Tips on hiding ED from family and friends 7) Pro-recovery 8) Selfies and 9) Other. As was common in traditional websites, these images also showed a personified version of Anorexia, referring to it as a friend named, “Ana”. Out of 7,560 images found with the hashtags “ana”, “starve”, and “fasting”, 1,951 were text-based quotes promoting starvation such as, “Hunger pains have become my latest addiction”, and, “Hush little baby don’t you cry, Ana’s gonna give you some skinny thighs” (Ging & Garvey, 2018, p. 1188). The next highest category was “Thinspiration” with 1,884 images. These images contained extremely thin bodies, protruding hip bones, collarbones, and ribs, thigh gaps, and before-after transformations (Ging & Garvey, 2018).

Instagram’s editing options and filter usage also allows an aesthetic view of eating disorders. By offering “attractive filters” these types of images can project a more appealing form of “art”. Ging and Harvey’s (2018) research concluded that:

As a result, the types of images posted tend to be more stylised and aesthetically sophisticated than on other platforms, with a lot of thinspiration material appearing in black and white or bleached out colours. This not only accentuates bone protrusion

but also references art photography and the kind of aesthetic frequently associated with high-end or designer fashion. It arguably also ‘tones down’ images of self-harm...which appear more gruesome when blood is red. (p.1192)

Therefore, pro ED images can blur the line of reality, and cause confusion among users. The way these images were presented caused the user to view them as nothing more than an image with body goals that could be attainable with control and dedication. Although this research did not prove that viewing these images caused harm to the viewer, it did show how images with hashtags promoting EDs could be easily found by pro-ana users or others.

Coping Through Stigma

Yeshua-Katz argued that people who suffered from stigma were not seen as “normal” but as “weak and inferior” (Goffman, 1963). These people will usually face an “unaccepting world” where their behaviors are seen as less than normal. In order to reduce disapproving attitudes from the “normal” crowds, stigmatized people will try to find new ways of coping and look elsewhere for support (Yeshua-Katz, 2015).

This support was most likely be found with others who shared the same experience and situation (Yeshua-Katz, 2015). In an online space, people with eating disorders have found just that. An online environment provides a safe space where people with ED can hide from the oppression they feel. Being able to share their stories and personal experiences makes them feel safe and accepted. These online social circles allow them to be themselves without judgement from the physical world.

Another reason that online communities are very appealing to stigmatized individuals is possibly the quick access to them. It was very easy to find online pro-ana communities which included interaction between users and a sense of “anonymity” (Yeshua-Katz, 2015, p. 1348). This means that pro-ana users can

talk in chat rooms, bulletins, and instant messaging without fear of meeting the other user outside the cyber world. Yeshua-Katz argued that seeking social support and being able to have control in online interactions, as opposed to “face-to-face” interactions, was a big factor as to why these people chose to join these communities (as cited in Walther & Boyd, 2002).

Pro-ana as a Safety Net

As previously stated, it is not uncommon for people with eating disorders to face negative reactions from others. According to Tong, Heinemann-LaFave, Jeon, Kolodziej-Smith, & Warshay, (2013) when people talk about their eating disorders and “anti-recovery attitudes” within their social circles, they are met with criticism (as cited in Dias, 2003). This can make the person feel alienated and leaves them no choice but to turn to the Internet.

The internet has become a haven for those with eating disorders. As mentioned earlier, websites glorifying anorexia and bulimia allowed its viewers to communicate with others with similar experiences, gave advice on losing weight, and most important, for them, provided emotional support. Most of the websites that provided “help” for these people are blogs. Since blogs provide interaction through posts and comments, people with eating disorders felt supported and heard. Blogs allowed them to, “freely express their view that anorexia is a ‘lifestyle’ rather than a ‘disorder’ or ‘illness’” (Tong, Heinemann-LaFave, Jeon, Kolodziej-Smith, & Warshay, 2013).

With this growing number of pro-ED websites, official websites such as Tumblr, Pinterest and Instagram, have updated their terms of service. Their terms include banning posts portraying self-harm, eating disorder, and thinspo. (Tong, Heinemann-LaFave, Jeon, Kolodziej-Smith, & Warshay, 2013). Despite continued efforts to shut down these websites, they continued to be popular within pro-ana communities.

The Search for Ana

Although these pro-ED websites may have provided emotional support for people with eating disorders, exposure to them caused more harm than good. As previously stated, pro-ana websites tend to reinforce the idea of extreme thinness, with “tips and tricks”. Disguised as a “supportive” forum, it could raise the risk of developing an eating disorder. Not only may people develop an eating disorder, they may also have been convinced of, “Ana”, as a lifestyle and not a disorder. Another concern is these websites did not provide any information about the consequences taking part in this, “lifestyle”, could cause (Lewis & Arbuthnott, 2012).

Lewis and Arbuthnott stated that about 1,000 monthly “hits” of the words, “pro-ana, pro-anorexia, proana, promia, pro-mia, proanorexia, probulimia, pro-bulimia, pro-ED, proED, pro eating disorder, pro-eating disorder, thin and support, thin and pro acceptance, thin and pro-reality, thinspiration, pro thinspiration, pro-thinspiration, pro-thinspo, pro thinspo” were searched in Google (Lewis & Arbuthnott, 2012). Results from Yahoo or Bing were not examined, but it said a lot about Google’s huge traffic around the globe. Due to the high number of pro-ED words searched, global interest, and the material presented with these words, a lot more people, perhaps vulnerable people, could be exposed.

Despite the high number of different words that were searched monthly, there could be a way to steer these people in a different direction. One idea was to provide helpful resources as soon as people began their search for pro-ED websites. As Lewis and Arbuthnott stated, in the United States there has been an initiative to present help lines and resources at the top of a search page (mainly Google) for those who search terms associated with the words, “suicide”, and, “suicide methods” (Lewis & Arbuthnott, 2012). Currently there are no helplines or resources in Google when searching for “pro-

ana”. Since Google gathers a lot of traffic, it is probably beneficial to have Google show helplines on the top of the search page (Lewis & Arbuthnott, 2012). Even if it is not certain people will change their mind, it does not hurt to try this idea for people searching pro-ED websites.

Comparing Pro-recovery and Pro-ana websites

While the popularity of pro-ana websites is now evident, there are also some websites that choose to combat them. These websites are called recovery sites, or pro-recovery sites. These sites are usually secure and moderated by healthcare professionals, while others are peer facilitated. Most of them tend to be non-professional recovery forums that seek to provide support for those who are currently suffering or have suffered from EDs. There is usually heavy moderation in order to avoid triggering material to viewers. For instance, the use of numbers such as weight, BMI and clothing sizes were not allowed on the website. Furthermore, when users would ask serious medical questions, they would be asked to refer to their doctors (Riley, Rodham, & Gavin, 2009). Where pro-ana would promote the importance of thinness and numbers, pro-recovery sites do the exact opposite. Yet both talk about the body and the effects of EDs such as hair loss or other health problems, which could influence a person’s decision about their health.

Pro-recovery and pro-ana websites both put effort into achieving a certain behavior. Pro-ana websites are used primarily to encourage viewers and participants to engage in ED behaviors, while pro-recovery encourages these individuals to seek help. Although their language may be different, they both talk about EDs and effects on the body. Riley, Rodham, and Gavin (2009) reference a post from a pro-recovery website that states:

Physically wise my mom is pushing for me to gain back my muscle mass (apparently I have lost quite a bit) and some lbs. this

seems bizarre to me. I am working on eating more and better. My blood pressure seems to be much more stable, I am not orthostatic now, meaning when I stand up I don't feel like passing out. Yay! (as cited in Extract 2, Recovery).

Here we can see that this pro-recovery post mentions their body size being small and trouble with fainting, due to the struggle with an eating disorder. However, it also makes sure to include their experience of health improvement, in contrast to pro-ana, where the main focus is to prove thinness, and talk about recovery is near impossible to find. Another quote referenced by Riley, Rodham, and Gavin (2009) in contrast to this pro-recovery post, is:

My hair is starting to thin out A LOT!! Its really scary!! Has this happened to anyone else?? Any advice on how to stop this? I'm so tempted to go buy that Rogain for Women shampoo!! LoL!!! (cited in Extract 9, Pro-Ana).

Comparing this quote to the pro-recovery quote shows that both included talk about their body and how it has been affected.

While there may be clear differences in these websites, like combating EDs or maintaining EDs, they both continue sharing their body health and experiences (Riley, Rodham, & Gavin, 2009). Viewers who are curious and search any of these websites may question their decision to join or not. If beauty is what people with eating disorders, or developing eating disorders, seek, posts on hair loss, fainting, and yellow skin may change their motivation (Riley, Rodham, & Gavin, 2009). One thing is certain though, pro-recovery sites strive to help those who are struggling or struggled with eating disorders.

Proud2BMe

The Internet has become a huge source of health information that benefits people (Aardoom, Dingemans, Boogaard, & Van Furth, 2014). With smart phones, laptops, tablets, and other tools with Internet access, it is likely for people to feel empowered.

Aardoom, Dingemans, Boogaard, & Van Furth (2014) stated that empowerment can help people become more self-aware of their illnesses and can lead to a "more efficient use of health services and improved mental health outcomes" (Wallerstein, 2006). The rise of online pro-ana communities caused helpful E-health initiatives to develop.

One E-health website that has since become as a popular health alternative to pro-ED websites is called "Proud2BMe". Proud2Bme provides individuals with information about eating disorders and encourages communication about them with "peers, family, and health care professionals" (Aardoom, Dingemans, Boogaard, & Van Furth, 2014). It also aims to empower individuals and helps provide resources as well as encouraging users and viewers to seek professional help. (Aardoom, Dingemans, Boogaard, & Van Furth, 2014).

According to Aardoom, Dingemans, Boogaard, & Van Furth (2014), people who visited this website expressed empowerment in sharing information, experiences, and recognition. They also claimed to feel "better informed", and, "increased optimism and control over the future, and increased confidence in treatment and the relationship with the therapist" (Aardoom, Dingemans, Boogaard, & Van Furth, 2014). This healthy alternative to pro-ED websites proves to be beneficial to individuals who otherwise would seek harmful ED content online.

Conclusion

Eating disorders can cause a lot of harm to people. Physical and mental health can become compromised when engaging in these behaviors. With the creation of the internet, online communities began forming. Some of these online communities were created to connect with other individuals who shared the same experiences as them, such as eating disorders. These pro-ED websites strive to maintain or develop eating disorders calling it a "lifestyle", rather than a disorder. Most of these websites consist of images of emaciated

bodies, tips and tricks on how to conceal ED behaviors, and blogs to share their stories and methods. Stigma from family and friends can cause those with EDs to turn to these online communities to seek acceptance and comfort. Despite the connection they might feel by sharing their experiences, pro-ED websites cause more harm than good.

Acknowledgement of this harmful content online caused websites like Instagram and Tumblr to display helpful resources upon pro-ED searches. Additionally, pro-recovery and E-health websites have emerged challenging these harmful websites. Websites like “Proud2BMe” have proven to be helpful in helping these individuals and continues to be a popular positive platform.

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